

In Quest of the Humanities (Again)

What We Can Learn from Research in the Arts

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The Quantification of Qualities

The tension at universities between the humanities and the exact sciences is an old sore. The cause is known: the humanities are increasingly measured according to the methods and rules of validation of the exact or positive sciences. Positivism asserts that all genuine knowledge should be based on facts, obtained through observation and measurements, which allow for verification. Such facts should thus preferably be countable and/or measurable, so that control is possible. This quantifiable condition of the scientific method evolved into an unbalanced institutional relationship with a preponderance of the exact sciences over the humanities. The result is that broadly interested and committed intellectuals had to make way for specialists and experts. These days, even entire departments and faculties are being ousted from the university. In 2016, for example, the University of Rotterdam's Faculty of Philosophy was shut down because it was said to be unprofitable.¹ It is in other words not so much the exact sciences that "threaten" the humanities, but rather higher expectations regarding profit margins. The positive sciences simply attract more students, who can then often move on to the business world, and they also supply far higher ratings in terms of scientific output. On the level of research, too, a mentality geared towards profitability is by now a well-known ailment. It is not what you write that counts; the decisive elements are how much you publish as well as the impact factor and ranking of the journal in which your writings appear. And the management that arose in university governance during the 1990s is forever at the ready to measure all these factors to see whether we are still able to compete with the rest of the world.

The grievance is perennial as well as the lament among scholars that accompanies it.² The logic of quantification is a numerical logic based on the assumption that (scientific) quality can be expressed in quantity. These days it seems to pop up everywhere in the ubiquitous evidence-based education, research, *and* policy. It concerns a technique of measurement that Margaret Thatcher once implemented in order to make the National Health Service and education "more efficient" in

her country (see Glaser). That method was founded on mutual comparability. Within the realms of the research industry, this logic of quantification has generated a remarkable latent side effect: engaged in mutual competition, research projects increasingly start to resemble one another. While aiming to raise their profile and to distinguish themselves, researchers paradoxically begin to mirror each other, which renders true differentiation and innovation difficult. In brief, science is formatted, a phenomenon that the American sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell once typified with the notion of “competitive isomorphism” (66). The agendas of scientific funds, which often tend to “streamline” research by favoring certain pre-instated themes, enhance that tendency. Whoever wished to obtain funding for research on the arts and culture in the 1980s, for instance, was required to focus on cultural diversity; during the 1990s, it was about gender; in the early 2000s, the creative industry was the flavor of the day; and, today, cultural leadership is the center of attention. Also European research programs too continually align their so-called “spearheads” and thus appear to be subject to the same kind of competitive isomorphism.

The result of this mirroring effect within a market logic is that the human sciences risk going astray from the path of the Enlightenment, which takes the *condition humaine* as its central tenet. It was the existential condition of human being that had to be studied and interpreted, not only to understand where man is coming from and which factors might make him or her unique, but especially to gain a greater view of the horizon in order to navigate more precisely where one is heading. What choices do we as human beings have to make in order to make our existence on earth less tedious, happier, more prosperous, and also more beautiful? To put it differently, the trajectory of the humanities is closely interwoven with a political project of human progress. To be clear, with “political,” we are not implying partisan politics, no left or right; instead we understand politics in the sense the French philosopher Jacques Rancière describes it in his 2015 book *Dissensus*: as a business of giving shape to living together, to society. The discrepancy between scientific relevance or irrelevance, but also between good and bad art, is on an Enlightened trajectory always gauged according to the capacity to advance a universal human existence. The task of the humanities is therefore anything but slight. They have to study the past of humankind, its psyche, its economic management, its social relationships, its cultural context, and its artistic expression with a view to the future. What is it that this horizon – even with everything we already know – can improve further? Such an ambitious progressive project presumes at least two “competences” on the part of humanities scholars: (1) they have to take an overarching look at the

whole of humanity in its entire context, and (2) they have to dare to imagine the future.

Because of the first quality, the humanities scholar is an intellectual who has to switch continually between science, politics, law, art, ethics, ecology, and so forth. In other words, humanities scholars would have great difficulty to keep sight of humanity as a whole when they limit themselves to a single specialism or discipline. On the contrary, as a servant of mankind, the humanities scholar must, on the contrary, forever maintain the border traffic between those disciplines (Harbers 37). The second competence implies that the humanities scholar should dare to make use of a “skill” in which artists are very well versed too: the power of imagination. It concerns the capacity to be able and to venture to imagine a different possible world. This does not mean simply coming up with free-floating, invented scenarios or utopias, but giving people a chance to experience that newly imagined reality in some way, or even making it palpable. The eighteenth-century German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten once stated that aesthetics is “the art of thinking beautifully.” He did not simply mean the act of thinking about beauty, but a thinking that dares to reinvent itself. The aesthetician must be bold enough to explore the imaginary and to move beyond the domain of what can be known merely cognitively (Raunig 96-97). Aesthetics forms a *horizon aestheticum* where scientifically verified knowledge and imagination overlap. The call here is to dare to envision a more beautiful world in the liminal zone between fiction and non-fiction, imagination and reality, or also between utopia and realism.

Concisely put, the logic of quantification and the competitive isomorphism increasingly prevent the humanities from venturing beyond their own specialisation and from thinking beyond the limits that delineate their field. The rat race to accumulate publications in journals that are ranked A1, for example, forces researchers into specialization. The current format of the scholarly article requires one to cite all relevant literature in the domain at hand, before one is even allowed to think a single inch beyond these achievements. This is a professional obligation, which incidentally also perpetuates the logic of quantification through recurrent citations that, as such, also keeps the scientific publishing industry profitable. But this tendency, together with the other developments described above, make speculative thinking almost taboo. The humanities scholar is expected to indicate accurately what was and what is, but should refrain from making statements about what could be. This expectation also limits their performative power: the humanities can still study reality, but

intervening in that reality in a most effective and performative way – which would mean contributing to making that reality – can only be done with great difficulty. This is how the sciences go astray. They leave the path of the Enlightenment towards a better future because they are no longer permitted to imagine it, which also diminishes their power to co-construct that future. This is no doubt one of the reasons why today economics – which after all is a humanities subject and a science – cannot come up with any serious alternatives for consecutive and continuous crises.

Instead of repeating the known criticisms of the quantification logic and the implications for scholarly research, we want to search for impulses that go against the tendency to legitimize human science with hard numbers. For this we seek inspiration in the arts. Indeed, since the so-called Bologna Declaration in 1999, art schools in European higher education have developed their own research practices starting from their own specific questions and methods, which are averse to existing scientific research formats. We speak from our limited experience as members of various reading and evaluation committees who assess and honor research applications in the arts, but also as members of the editorial board of *FORUM+*, a journal dedicated to the dissemination of research in the arts in Belgium and the Netherlands.³ We therefore focus on the context of the Low Countries, realizing that it differs fundamentally from, for example, the Anglo-Saxon world (where practice-based research in the arts has long been a recognized practice at universities) or the Scandinavian countries (where practice-based research in the arts received a strong financial boost from their funding authorities the past decades).⁴

As in many other European countries, the academization of education in the arts led also in Belgium to heated discussions about what that research should look like. With this essay, we want to make a plea for the autonomy of the artist in the development of his or her research questions and methods, and by extension for the autonomy of the humanities scholar. We hope, in particular, that the latter can be inspired by recent developments in the domain of artistic research, which, in our opinion, can offer a fertile breeding ground to revitalize the humanities. Our as yet – admittedly – relatively modest experience with research and doctorates in the arts already shows that there is still a lot to be gained here. Nonetheless, the awareness of the imaginative potential regarding what the humanities could *also* be and mean, has steadily grown in the past few years.

The Academization of Education in the Arts

In the context of competition and quantification, it is of little surprise that the art schools reacted with some suspicion to the Bologna Declaration, which triggered the academization of arts education. The aim of that agreement was a harmonization of higher education (HE) within the European Union, and beyond, with a view to facilitate smooth mobility for lecturers and students between different universities and colleges. The result of this uniformization was incidentally also the demand that European art schools in HE were urged to re-organize their structures according to the Anglo-Saxon model of Bachelor and Masters (BA-MA) as we know it today. Consequently, the various different courses at the institutions in the participating countries had to be attuned to one another. The Declaration moreover stipulated that MA courses should by definition be academic. This essentially implies that education should support and initiate research in an environment that has an active research culture.

It is known that the majority of the art schools (at least in Continental Europe) were not keen about this measure that was imposed from above. The academization and the assimilation within a university system would not only greatly affect their autonomy, also the previously mentioned logic of formatting and quantification threatened to lay an undue burden on their core business, that is, the power of imagination. And that fear is not wholly unjustified. During the past decade, we have been flooded with publications and symposia about research in the arts.⁵ Their content has scarcely assuaged any fears and represents the widely diverging opinions on the forms artistic research should take. Some authors, for example, swear by an academic text as an essential accompaniment to the artistic portfolio for a doctoral degree in the arts. When Janneke Wesseling was recently appointed as Chair of Practice and Theory of Research in the Visual Arts at Leiden University, she posited in her inaugural lecture the following definition for research in the arts:

Artistic research is the critical and theoretically positioned reflection by the artist on her practice in the world, in art works and in the written text.
(9-10)

That research or a PhD in the Arts should be reflective is something we subscribe to. The question, however, is whether that reflection can only be formulated in theory and writing. Can images, performances, videos, or even poetry not furnish artists with the means for a critical and (self)reflective thinking about their own practice? Other authors have indeed argued that an artistic practice has sufficient

self-critical potential to be considered as an independent outcome of research. Philosopher Dieter Lesage, for instance, has repeatedly made an ardent plea for the idea that the arts should be recognized as specific forms of writing. Hence, according to Lesage, the doctorate in the arts is no longer in need of a written supplement. The artistic portfolio *is* the artist's writing (Lesage, "Art, Research, Entertainment"; Lesage, "Tegen het supplement").

Lesage reacts more specifically against academic tendencies that expect artistic research to conform to scientific standards. One of the representatives of this opinion is Robin Nelson, Director of Research at the University of London Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Nelson has a great deal of expertise on what he prefers to call Practice as Research (PaR),⁶ which he defines as:

research projects in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry. (8-9)

In his 2013 book *Practice as Research in the Arts*, Nelson develops a methodological model for artistic research that is grounded in his own experience of working with theater practitioners in the UK. Given his aim "to extend the acceptance of PaR within 'the academy,'" (6), Nelson intends to bring PaR closer to more traditional academic disciplines that undertake both qualitative and quantitative research. While recognizing the special importance of tacit or even embodied knowledge as well as knowledge gained through critical reflection, Nelson stresses the value of learning from other established research methodologies in support of rigorous investigations in PaR. There is no doubt about the importance of Nelson's contribution to the field – particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world – and his book will definitely help many practitioner-researchers with submitting their work to research audits and with undertaking PhDs. Nevertheless, Nelson represents an academic position that legitimizes research in the arts by modeling it on traditional academic approaches instead of taking it for its own specificity. It is therefore not surprising that this kind of top-down approach does not fall well with some actors in the field of the arts and is often experienced as didactic and patronizing.

This mistrust is not only fed by differences of opinion about what research in the arts could or should be. The fear of contamination is also stimulated on an institutional level. After all, in Continental Europe, it is rare that artists get to fill

in the position of a department's Chair, such as the one Wesseling occupies. Instead, such vacancies are always assigned to academics or at least to those Faculty members or applicants who do have a university qualification and, for that reason, also have the alleged theoretical credentials for the position.⁷ The same often goes for memberships in official research councils and (university) steering committees that are entrusted to validate PhDs in the Arts and award research funding. This situation only increases the suspicion that artists have towards scholarly research. Because artists appear to have been denied the right to be assessed by their own peers, they are compromised in their autonomy – at least as far as research in the arts is concerned. At the moment, we can only hope this institutional imbalance is part of the growing pains of the still recent history of research in the arts, and that these pains will be rectified in the face of contestations, either small or large, that are likely yet to come.

What we as academics must not do, however, is to lay down the law about what should constitute research in the arts and which methodological paths artists should follow in pursuing this endeavor. In other words, we should refrain from applying to the field of research in the arts the very same process that also deeply affected the humanities and which imposed the logic of formatting research into preconceived and qualitative templates by taking the exact sciences as the leading model. Instead, let us turn things around and consider what the humanities can learn from the arts. Let us take a look at the most conspicuous features or methodologies underpinning artistic research in order to glean what is not happening anymore in the humanities, or is not yet happening enough. In what follows, we will again take our personal experiences and observations as a starting point for a critical reflection on the approaches, methods, and questions that might direct research in the arts. It goes without saying that we do not aspire to undertake the impossible task of describing the field in any exhaustive manner. We are only focusing on those aspects of artistic research that, in our opinion, can help to re-steer research in the humanities. Moreover, the specific cases of doctoral research in the arts we will be referring to are taken from the local context of Flanders, which is most germane to this issue's theme and also the context we are most familiar with. It should be clear, however, that our choices do not imply any value judgement and do not cover the diversity of ongoing research in the arts in Flanders, Continental Europe, and beyond.

Subjectivity and Manipulability

As members of various reading committees that evaluate applications for research projects in the arts, we came to a remarkable realization: applications regularly

lack a concrete research question and/or a formulation of a problem. Rather than questioning reality and wanting to know what reality is by researching it, artists tend to prefer to investigate what is possible, and not yet realized or given. They seem to aspire to test reality for its potential, but without an all too concrete plan or clearly articulated hypothesis of possible outcomes. They do not start from the measurable and the achievable, but rather from the non-measurable and especially, that which can be made. Artists essentially want to make art, and that is also true for the majority of researchers in the arts. They want to “put” something in the world and add something to it.

This attitude sets them apart from the humanities scholar who – through a process of interpretation or data analysis – wishes in the first place to arrive at a better understanding of reality. Nevertheless, humanities scholars too can by means of publications and lectures add something to the world, and their new insights have in some cases effectively changed social interactions and regulations (such as, for example, when the discovery of new historical facts grounds political reformations; or the manner in which gender and queer studies have changed labor regulations). And many scholars in the humanities hope indeed that their research will generate an impact on reality. But whoever interprets data with the intention of having an effect on the world, with a view to generating social, political, economic, or ecological change, can easily be accused of collecting precisely that data which matches their preconceived aims, and therefore of “unscientific” behavior. The same can also be said of someone who collects historical information to write biographies with commercial aims. In brief, whoever embarks on research in the humanities with the aim of intervening in the world (or for personal financial gain), is quickly, and sometimes very rightly, placed under the suspicion of fraud, biased interpretation, or at the very least, of subjectivity.

For claims regarding the alleged objectivity and neutrality of scientific methods, the exact sciences provide again the benchmark. The question is whether humanities scholars, who are a subject themselves, have the neutrality at all to perceive matters “objectively” or in an “uncolored” way. Would they really be able, like Baron von Munchausen, to pull themselves out of the swamp by their own wig and to rise up out of their own human world? Or is the distant, apparently objective discourse that humanities scholars develop in A1-journals not already a rhetorical strategy in the first place, designed to mask their genuine involvement and their subjective, perhaps even ideological. position?

We should of course not overlook the acceptance and the actual use of a subjective stance in some of the “softer” social sciences and humanities. Feminist writing, ethnography, and narrative inquiry, for example, have shifted away from the data-based, “quantitative” methods of the natural sciences in response to the growing recognition that human subjectivity is indeed inevitably implicated in the production of knowledge and that not everything about the universe and the place of human beings within it can be understood through measurement. In ethnography, the extensive discourse on the so-called “reflexive turn” is indicative of the increasing awareness that a participant-observer’s ways of seeing can lead to misinterpretations of an “other” culture (see, for example, Foley). Feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway have similarly argued that gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject, and practices of inquiry and justification. In hermeneutics, it is recognized that the question asked ultimately determines the answer (Lewin). And historiography, in the aftermath of deconstructionist philosophy, began to realize that writing history is a narrative act constructed by the historian in the present (Munslow).

Although we acknowledge that these fields accept that the knowledge they produce is not as “hard” or “objective” as in nineteenth-century positivism, assuming and recognizing instead that subjective elements cannot be ruled out in the process of positioning, analyzing, and measuring phenomena, our experience with research in the arts teaches us that the claim to objectivity is much less of an issue here. Research in the arts is de facto part of an existing subjective and singular artistic trajectory because of its focus on the particular and the unique. In this sense, the artist places the subject and therefore the human factor at the heart of the humanities, where it traditionally tended to belong as the *object* of research. Moreover, research in the arts allots to the research viewpoint – i.e. the researcher her- or himself – every possible subjective space. This is why the artist often has difficulties (complying) with the scientific method and its criteria of experimental testability, repeatability, and falsifiability. These are after all supposed to shield scientific research as much as possible from a subjective gaze. Subjectivity, in contrast, forms the core of research in the arts. It is precisely this subjectivity that generates a sense of the possible, namely the potential to see different possible realities, and also to actually realize them. The challenge for researchers in the arts, then, is to develop a methodology and methods to frame artistic, tacit, or embodied knowledge that is not grounded on the formulation of laws by way of deduction and induction but on a different, yet equally rigorous basis.

This is why we can consider research in the arts also as a personal quest. After all, research and methodology do not serve to know reality as it is, but to seek out, or even to actively create a new reality. To this end, the artist develops a specific and idiosyncratic research method. Such an artistic methodology is, unlike the classic scientific method, not employed for its propensity for comparison, repetition, control, and therefore objectivity. On the contrary, method here has a subjectifying function: it has to add to reality a new, subjective view upon that reality. This can be expressed in an experimental musical repertoire, a different dance idiom, or a radically atypical plot, but also – as we have witnessed in recent years – in a different political party, an innovative form of (co-)housing, or an unconventional urbanistic plan.

Fiction as Method

Researchers in the domain of the arts have privileged access to the toolbox of the arts: they know how to activate imagination, the imaginary, or the unreal, and thereby offer a different or unknown perspective on the reality to which they relate. In the context of research in the arts, this newly added reality belongs mostly to the world of fiction (a new novel, an alternative play, etc.). Via the detour of fiction, they can research reality – the contemporaneous period, but just as well the past or the future – and test its conditions and manipulability. Through performative experiments in public space, for example, those fictions are often also genuinely injected into everyday reality. In this way, artists explore the boundaries between reality and fiction. By framing that reality as fiction, for instance, they not only offer a different point of view on the world, the city, or the area they are entering into dialogue with; they are also simultaneously shaping it. Whoever interprets reality differently does after all have a greater chance that she or he is also going to look and act differently, and is therefore also going to co-create a different reality.

To a certain extent, the method of fictionalizing reality is related to documentary art forms and genres such as docufiction, docudrama, or autofiction, in which authors or scriptwriters start from original, historical source material or verbal testimonies that are then re-activated in a fictional framework. But in many cases, the documentary impulse of researchers in the arts is outspokenly ambivalent. Often it is precisely the vague boundary between documentary and fiction that is a structural element of the work. In this manner, these researchers expose the impossibility of claims to truth or objectivity of the kind that often still reign in classical scientific methods. It is indeed the distinction between fiction and non-fiction that enables us to look at a given reality, as the sociologist Niklas Luhmann

stated. In his words, fiction makes a “second order observation” possible: it is only through fiction that we are able to see reality as reality (Luhmann 56). From this perspective, a romantic Hollywood film makes us understand that true love might be something entirely different. A conceptual dance performance can just as well lead us to understand that everyday movements can also be dance, which may prompt us to see the movements in the street, the classroom, or at home in a completely different light. Fiction thus teaches us how to see and experience reality.

A good example to illustrate this is the doctoral project by filmmaker Peter Van Goethem (RITCS Brussels). For *Screening the City: A Cinematic Archaeology of the City of Brussels*, Van Goethem created a science fiction film that is based on archival images of the European capital and which thus explores the edges between documentary and fiction. As a cinematographic archaeologist, he immersed himself in the archives of CINEMATEK and made an inventory of the imagery involving Brussels in the history of cinema. With the material he collected for this research, Van Goethem compiled *The Night Has Come* (2018), a post-apocalyptic story about science and mental manipulation. In a fictional visualization of a conflict of civilizations that is set in the future, he interestingly uses the past to offer a reflection on present-day society.

A related example can be found in the work of theater maker Chokri Ben Chikha. The archival research he carried out for his doctorate in the arts (KASK Ghent) formed the basis for a series of theater performances in which he playfully investigates stereotypes and cultural constructions of the “other.” With his company Action Zoo Humain, Ben Chikha took the Ghent World Fair of 1903 as the starting point for a critical analysis of colonial history and the way in which it continues to resonate in the present. At the Ghent World Fair, a group of people from Senegal and the Philippines were exhibited as exotic curiosities in imitated African villages for the white Westerner’s amusement. A hundred years later, the company founded a Truth Commission that, in a theatrical staging, brought the impact of this colonial past into view. Just like in Van Goethem’s project, historical sources and facts are fictionalized and offer spectators various new perspectives on this colonial past and its impact on the present.⁸

Aside from the play with temporality (Van Goethem) or postcolonial critique (Ben Chikha), these projects demonstrate that the boundary between fiction and reality is often very thin and quite difficult to trace. They visualize how reality itself is always already staged as well as determined by cultural imaginations. The

manner in which fiction is closely interwoven with our reality and thus also concretely (re-)shapes it, is the central subject in the photographs of Charlotte Lybeer. In her early work, Lybeer focused on the staged and controlled environments of gated communities and theme parks. For her doctoral project *Lifestyle Supermarket* (KASK Antwerp), she photographed people who experience their own fiction by transforming themselves into a fantastical creature. This resulted in a series on LARP-players (Live Action Role Playing), in which she portrays people in their costumes dressed as fantasy figures such as trolls or elves.⁹

These are just a few examples that give a sense of the forms research in the arts can take. But the question we are interested in is what this research might have to offer to the humanities. Anyone who assumes that fiction is strictly prohibited terrain for the sciences is mistaken. In sociology, for example, there was up until the 1970s still much enthusiastic talk about the importance of the “sociological imagination” (Mills). But also their colleagues, the so-called “quantitative” social scientists, who preferred to use surveys and analyses of data, were as reliant on fiction for setting up their research. What is a hypothesis other than an imaginary projection upon reality? Speculations about research outcomes in the form of hypotheses, but also devising surveys with a set of possible answers for respondents are fairly common practices that nevertheless reveal the more “artistic” side of what are considered to be more exact research techniques. The problem, however, is that under the pressure of methodological feasibility and measurability, these speculations about reality often tended to be reduced to rather modest hypotheses. A possible *imaginable* reality was thereby downsized to a potentially *measurable* reality. This tendency handcuffs a (scientifically) imaginable reality to methodological shortsightedness and sometimes even narrow-mindedness. As a(n intuitive) sense of the possible increasingly had to make way for a (measurable) sense of reality, critical utopian speculations subjugated themselves to pragmatic thinking, and looking far ahead had to yield to short-term thinking.

At the same time, fiction as method is in essence not that remote from what a historian does: as briefly suggested earlier, written history is ultimately “an act of the imagination” (Martin 6), filtered and colored by the values, interests, and assumptions of the historiographer. In his 2007 book *Narrative and History*, historian Alun Munslow convincingly demonstrates how historical explanations are narratives that result from choices every author-historian needs to make. As readers, we are often simply less aware of it.



Figure 6.1. “Forfaox” from the series *THE FURTASTIC ADVENTURES OF THE CABBIT AND THE FOLF* (2010-...) by Charlotte Lybeer. The photo series was created in the context of her PhD in the Arts: *Lifestyle Supermarket*.

But historical research based on archival sources is just as culturally determined and typified by its time as the artistic interpretation of those sources. In the end, the historian does select events from a multitude of information, and invents meanings and explanations in order to detect patterns and narrative structures in that multitude (Jenkins and Munslow; Clark). The historiographer, in other words, also needs a strong sense of imagination and uses creative and narrative instruments for constructing and representing the past. Under the guise of “objectivity,” however, this imaginative component is barely made visible in reports of classical historical research, just as in those of other disciplines in the humanities. The role of the researcher in mediating between the past and the present, or between scientific report and reality, is often carefully erased (see also Gielen, “Museumchronotopics”).

Historians have of course recognized for quite some time that historical reality is complex, and they increasingly choose to adopt a multiple perspective on the past. The arts make this multiperspectivity explicit. This is undoubtedly the benefit of research in the arts that confronts fiction and reality: the fictional framework emphasizes that every perspective upon reality is mediated imaginatively and therefore relative. Every reconstruction is founded, in part, on imagination. Fiction can be a way to make that ambivalence and multiplicity visible. What could be gained if we were to throw our own position as a researcher and our own subjectivity into the scale? Would that lead us to disclose new realities, or to develop deeper scientific insights? We do not have the answer to these questions, but it does make us curious about the potential of artistic research. The as yet early experiences with research in the arts in particular remind us of our own subjectivity as humanities scholars. To us, it does seem useful not to conceal or repress (any longer) our subjective (and ideological) position in the research reports and articles we write – and this, paradoxically enough, in the name of scientific objectivity. In the end, we can understand the results of research far better when we not only know which methods the researcher used, but when we also know about the subjective experience and the ideological position from where she or he is speaking. Just as we expect emerging artist-researchers to take a bird’s-eye view of their own practice in an auto-reflexive manner and to make their own subjectivity explicit, we should be able to ask of scientists that they possess self-knowledge and make themselves known. This is the question of self-consciously bringing the human factor back into the humanities and this – perhaps curiously – with a view to the advancement of that scientific scholarship.

Dialogue as Format

In the project applications we have read, we also detected a remarkable tendency for research in which dialogue occupies a central place. This apparent interest is explicitly not about conducting interviews in order to make quantitative and qualitative analyses, but about artistic projects that expressly rely on conversation and the exchange of knowledge and experience as a format to arrive at new insights or working models. For example, a designer makes no formal analysis of a certain kind of design, but proposes, through workshops and discussions, to arrive at new work. A theater artist organizes a series of salons in which she enters into dialogue with experts from diverse domains to talk about the questions of her research. A visual artist experiments in turn with the possibility of relinquishing her own authorship in favor of collaborative working relationships. Such projects not only put forward an alternative method, they also question the authorship of a particular body of work or research and stimulate collaboration and collective art formats. Can an artwork be the result of dialogue and interaction, without being ascribed to the “genius” or the unique talent of a single artist or researcher?

It is no coincidence that this “Socratic” tendency is situated predominantly in the performing arts. Theater, dance, and music are art forms that are by nature reliant upon dialogue and collaboration, precisely because the creation of the work is often a collective event in which performers are co-creators. In his latest book *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, published in 2012, the sociologist Richard Sennett takes the music rehearsal as an example of an interesting form of dialogue: “in rehearsal they [the musicians] have to learn the ego-busting art of listening, turning outward” (14). This does not mean that the musician – or, by extension, the actor or dancer – loses his or her ego and artistic autonomy to the advantage of the larger whole. On the contrary, according to Sennett:

Musical character appears instead through little dramas of deference and assertion; in chamber music, particularly, we need to hear individuals speaking in different voices which sometimes conflict, as in bowings or string colour. Weaving together these differences is like conducting a rich conversation. (14–15)



Figure 6.2. *Every Conversation Hides Another Conversation*, PhD in the Arts by Nico Dockx in CAC Brétigny, 2014, with tea ceremony by Erik Hagoort and Master students, various speakers, and food. Photo: Jean-Baptiste Decavèle, 2014. Image © archive Nico Dockx



Figure 6.3. *L'être et le jouant – Het zijn in het spelen*, PhD in the Arts project by Jan Steen, 2014. Photo © Kurt Van der Elst

A telling example of research in which dialogue and the exchange of knowledge were the starting point, is *The New Conversations*, the doctorate in the arts that Nico Dockx successfully defended in 2014 during an event titled *Every Conversation Hides Another Conversation*. Central to this research was the rich archive of the Dutch artist and writer Louwrien Wijers. In a continual dialogue with the artist herself, Dockx examined how he could disclose this archive in an alternative way, allowing for new meanings and interpretations. To this purpose, he organized meetings between artists, theorists, and art students in Antwerp, Berlin, Amsterdam, New York, and Hallum. During conversations, performances, and more informal moments, such as cooking and eating together, Dockx experimentally investigated how the material from Wijers' archives could start a new life of its own.

Another example of dialogue as a research format is the so-called LESFESTIVAL, a festival of lessons organized by theater artist Willem de Wolf and curator Dries Douibi for the drama students of the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp. Dora van der Groen's pedagogical model had been at the center of this program for decades.¹⁰ In order to break away from this predominant model, or at least to question it, the organizers invited five guest lecturers from very diverse backgrounds and with distinct aesthetic practices. During an intense two-week period, the students were immersed in a range of different traditions, for the first time also in small groups composed of students from different years. For the lecturers, students, and coordinators involved in the LESFESTIVAL, dialogue and exchange functioned as a means to open up questions about the structure, build-up, and content of the coursework, but just as well about pedagogy and idealism and the position of the theater actor in the field.¹¹

The dialogue format was also central to the doctoral project by theater maker and lecturer Jan Steen (KASK, Ghent). His project *L'être et le jouant – Het zijn in het spelen – Being in Playing* sought for an answer to one of the most elusive aspects of theater making: the "work" of the actor and his or her "stage presence." Besides conducting extensive empirical research with students, Steen also undertook a theoretical study of classic acting models that concluded with a series of fictitious dialogues between an actor, director, lecturer, and/or student. In his voluminous book *Being in Playing* (2014), Steen engages the diverse voices of influential theater instructors (Grotowski, Barba) in a fictional dialogue with contemporary cognitive scientists and neurobiologists. In this manner, the author presents possible discussions that can be regarded as different scenarios. Each page reads

like a theater text that invites the reader to empathize with the responses of the imagined interlocutors. Steen offers no univocal answers, but instead, he consciously chooses to work in the spirit of Barba with “multiple dramaturgies.”

Again could ask ourselves the question what such methods could mean for the humanities. Dialogue and exchange have of course always been important for scientific quality and the dissemination of knowledge. Yet something is at times wrong with the form this dialogue takes. Next to published writings, scholars enter into dialogue with each other at scientific meetings and conferences. The programs of these events, however, tend to be crammed with numerous parallel sessions, to such an extent that there is rarely time or space for a genuine dialogue or exchange – unless it happens during informal coffee breaks or social dinners. What would it mean for the humanities to introduce experimental set-ups for which the participants do not prepare a PowerPoint presentation in advance? Could we organize symposiums where there are no presentations of research results or a state of progress, but where the exchange at the event itself is instead considered a part of the actual research? Is there, in the present competitive atmosphere among academics, enough confidence to test preliminary findings among international peers? And what would the benefit be of allowing others to come and cook with us in our research kitchens? A genuine Socratic conference does perhaps offer a greater chance of scientific progress, rather than merely advancing the personal careers of individual scientists.

Performative Impact

The qualities and approaches we have identified in research in the arts (subjectivity, fiction, and dialogue) demonstrate how the field has an exceptional performativity, a capacity the humanities are at risk of losing.¹² Research in the arts not only strives to consciously observe reality as it is, it is also a process of performatively *making* a (new) reality. We understand performativity here in the same vein as feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who draws on the speech act theory of John Austin and John Searle to argue that linguistic utterances, next to reiterating and sustaining cultural codes and gender roles, also have the power to bring about a change in the world by representing it as changed (Austin; Butler). Just like language, every artistic idiom can also be performative. Far more than simply being a reference to or a representation of reality, the artistic expression itself can be an act that has a societal impact. Thus, it does not merely come down to interpreting the world, but also to changing it, to paraphrase Karl Marx’s well-known eleventh “Thesis on Feuerbach” (1845).¹³ This performative impulse is essentially the specific quality or privilege of conducting research in the arts. Its

research questions (which are often actually not questions) as well as its methods and reports bespeak not only a desire for knowledge, but also – and above all – a desire to create. Artists do not only explore the boundaries of what is thinkable or imaginable, they are also in a privileged position to develop and realize new possibilities. These new possibilities can be imagined on a conceptual level by developing imaginary plans, fictitious sketches, or models of thought, but they can just as well be materialized in prototypes, new technologies, or models.

Artists such as Eric Joris (Brussels) and Angelo Vermeulen (Delft), for example, play a leading role in the use of new technology. With his company composed of artists and scientists, Joris chose theater as the experimental space in which to develop immersive media. As an artist, he has been at the basis of European developments in the field of 3D and omnidirectional video during the past few decades. Today, Joris explores the boundaries of motion capture in order to let viewers experience our solar system in a tangible way. The result is a virtual planetarium in which the visitor can discover interstellar space.¹⁴ Angelo Vermeulen too is currently exploring the limits of our universe. At the Technical University of Delft, he conceives the spaceships – or what he calls “starships” – of the future. These starships are concrete and metaphorical at the same time: they instigate an unconventional way of thinking about how people, technology, and biology can live together in different ways and find solutions for dealing with an uncertain future. Even more than expanding human boundaries for the future, they reflect on the present moment in which we live.¹⁵

The research projects by Elly Van Eeghem (KASK, Ghent) are very different, yet they too offer a reflection on the future and on how we are living today. Van Eeghem conducts research on visualizations of urban development and focuses on places in Belgium and abroad that are faced with sweeping physical or societal changes. With the aim to create new urban and social models, she draws parallels between urban neighborhoods in Paris, Berlin, and Montreal and areas of her hometown Ghent. Together with the inhabitants and architects, she immerses herself in the history of a particular neighborhood, scrutinizes urban plans and designs, and uses fictional scenarios to develop alternative models of living for the future. In this manner, she not only offers a critical perspective on today’s models of living, but she also effectively intervenes in the existing social fabric(s).¹⁶

The performative capacity of the arts is obviously not limited to theater, technology, and participatory art. A sculptor or a painter can also have a

performative impact on the world in which she or he lives. This aim is clearly present in the doctoral project of painter Karin Hanssen, *The Borrowed Gaze: A Dialogue with Time* (2016). Following an in-depth study of the historical *Rückenfigur* (the figure seen from the back) as well as the motif of the woman as an object (of lust) in art history, Hanssen offers a feminist answer to this passive female image by making a series of variations in which she ascribes a minimal personality to these women. The depicted young ladies performatively take the world into their own hands by using their own imagination, just as Hanssen herself performatively acts upon the paintings. In this manner, Hanssen illustrates almost literally the aforementioned Enlightened path of the human sciences that study mankind and its past in order to arrive, through the imagination, at a better world; a world in which she, as a woman, gains autonomy over her own role. This means that history is not only studied, but also that history is remade and written anew.

Intuition, Creativity, and Imagination in Research Output

We connect notions such as subjectivity, fiction, and performativity, but also creativity, intuition, and imagination in the first place with artists, or with other creative professions, such as architects, designers, or fashion designers. Artists are indeed, by definition, creative and lucid minds who have the capacity to think “out of the box.” But this also happens to be one of the essential characteristics of a good scientist. It is well known that some of the best scientists made their most significant discoveries on the basis of intuitive insights that they had to test experimentally (Csikszentmihalyi; Gielen, *Creativity and Other Fundamentalisms*). Coincidence, the unexpected, and the unplanned play, of course, an invaluable role in scientific research. And yet these qualities are today somewhat underappreciated in an academic climate in which mainly efficiency-thinking determines which research gets financed. It is telling that the Belgian Nobel prize in Physics winner François Englert clearly stated that, in the present scientific context, he would never have been able to carry out his research. Moreover, research results are nowadays easily idealized as the outcome of a logical and rectilinear process. As we have argued, research in the arts can be revitalizing for research in the humanities and, by extension, for all academic disciplines. We are therefore pleading for creativity, intuition, and imagination to be valued again as necessary qualities for a good researcher and as important driving forces for academic research.

Also with regard to research output, the arts can certainly be inspiring and even open up new avenues for the humanities scholar, who is used to to

communicating his or her research mainly through lectures and articles. Research in the arts, on the other hand, has many forms and various kinds of outcomes. Often researchers combine the written word with other, more performative or visually expressive formats and media. For research in the arts, the exhibition is obviously the most evident form for showing results to a wider audience. But we just as well see that artists are keen to explore other options: a photographer writes a novel; a fashion designer works with 3D-printing; a composer experiments with musical notation and exhibits his or her scores in an art gallery. In short, the research finds its conclusion in multiple forms and results. Why would academics not present their research results in an exhibition, or process them in a documentary or a novel? It already happens sporadically. Herman Van Goethem, the present rector of the University of Antwerp, is a good example: he set up a museum about the Holocaust, and his research lies at the basis of Flemish writer Jeroen Olyslaegers' latest novel *Will* (2016). The simple fact is that these more creative forms are rarely recognized as valid output formats in comparison with current academic instruments of measurement and tables of quantification, even if the reach in terms of audiences and, by consequence, also the societal impact of these other forms is probably greater. Why should a novel or a museum exhibition carry any less weight than an A1-publication? Do they help science any less than a publication that will possibly be cited a hundred times, but which is in fact only truly read by a mere five colleagues? Let us, with the assistance of the methods of research in the arts, replace the simulacrum of the impact factor for a desire for genuine impact. Let us put the humanities back on the track of the quest of using our creativity, subjectivity, and imaginative power to push and pull at the world.

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¹ See also, for example, the elimination of the Department of Philosophy at Middlesex University in 2010, even if it was the university’s highest ranking department, and the uproar about the dismantling of (certain) humanities subjects at the University of Amsterdam in 2014. There was quite some discussion about the situation at Middlesex University, which led to significant publications on the theme of this article, such as Andrew McGettigan’s 2013 book *The Great University Gamble*.

² A lot has been written about the increased demand for academic profitability in opinion pieces and analyses. See, for instance, the recent publication of the Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten (The Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for the Sciences and the Arts): *Het professoraat anno 2016: Reflectie over een beroep in volle verandering (Professorship in the Year 2016: Reflection on a Profession in Full Transformation)*, which analyzes the consequences of New Public Management on professorships (De Dijn et al.). Examples of opinion pieces include: Marc Reynebeau’s “Selfie met Wikipedia” (“Selfie with Wikipedia,” *De Standaard*, 14 July 2016) and Maarten Reijnders’ “Vlaamse professoren in malaise” (“Flemish Professors Ill at Ease,” *Knack*, 1 August 2016).

³ The authors of this text have, since 2014 and 2015 respectively, been part of the reading committees of The Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Antwerp) and the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp. They are also members of various research groups in Antwerp and Brussels in which artistic research plays a central role, such as the Antwerp Research Institute for the Arts (ARIA), The Research Centre for Visual Poetics, and the Joint Research Group THEA | Theatricality and the Real. They are also on the editorial team of *FORUM+ voor Onderzoek en Kunsten | for Research and the Arts*: www.forum-online.be.

⁴ We wish to thank the reviewers of this article for their valuable feedback and suggestions. However, as one of them rightly remarks in her or his report, it is somewhat paradoxical that this contribution, which articulates more of an engaged position in the field of human sciences than that it tries to answer a research question according to a well-defined scientific method, is assessed through a process of peer review, with questions and criteria that do not necessarily apply to the type of text that is presented here.

⁵ See, for instance, Nelson; Lesage, “Who’s Afraid of Artistic Research?”; Lesage, “Art, Research, Entertainment”; Elkins; Borgdorff; Wesseling. For a comprehensive list of publications in the Anglo-Saxon world, see Nelson 223-225.

⁶ “Practice-based research” or “practice as research in the arts” are the terms most commonly used in the UK, whereas “practice-led research” appears more often in Australia. We prefer to use the broader term “research in the arts” as it also includes more theoretical and historical research projects in the domain of the arts.

⁷ To illustrate just how ingrained this tendency to “forget” about artists (or even to exclude them) is when it comes to the theorization of artistic practices, we ourselves came to the somewhat painful realization that also the editorial team of our own journal for research in the arts (*FORUM+*) counted until recently only one actor and one musician among its ten members. The balance has now improved, since also a sound artist, a visual artist, and a photographer have joined the team.

⁸ For more information, see www.actionzoohumain.be, and for a slightly more elaborate discussion of this performance, see Wynants.

⁹ For more information on Charlotte Lybeer, see www.charlottelybeer.be.

¹⁰ Dora van der Groen was an influential Belgian actress and theater director who trained generations of young Flemish actors as the Head of the Drama department of the Royal Conservatoire of Antwerp (from 1980 until 2009).

¹¹ For more information on this project, see de Wolf. See also the contribution by Naomi Velissariou in this issue for another example of a theater artist who in her work aims to move beyond the influential legacy of Dora van der Groen by developing alternative approaches to actor’s training.

¹² In his contribution to this issue, Bart Philipsen similarly argues that the notion of performativity provides a common and potentially fruitful ground for a renewed rapprochement between theater studies and literary studies.

¹³ In the eleventh Thesis, Marx states that “philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to *change* it” ([1845] 1996 , 84).

¹⁴ For more on this work, see Vanhoutte and Bigg, www.crewonline.org, and www.parsnetwork.org.

¹⁵ For more on the work and research of Angelo Vermeulen, see www.angelovermeulen.net.

¹⁶ For more on the work and research of Elly Van Eeghem, see <http://ellyvaneeghem.be/>.